

THE FANTASTIC IN THE STORIES OF JULIO CORTAZAR

Roger Caillois, in his book *Images, Images...*, makes a distinction between what he calls the "marvellous" and the "fantastic" in literature.¹ To him, the marvellous deals with beings and events that are literally out of this world; that is, they belong in another space and time, a completely different world from ours. The fantastic, on the other hand, deals with beings and events that are of this world but that interrupt the "natural" or normal flow of events in it; they are like unsettling or unknown pauses in the midst of our everyday routines, of our complacency. He explains it thus:

The universe of the *marvellous* is naturally populated by dragons, by unicorns and by fairies; the miracles and the metamorphoses are continuous there; the magical wand, of common use; the talismans, the genies, the elves and the thankful animals are abundant; the fairy godmothers immediately satisfy the desires of deserving orphans. . . In the *fantastic*, on the contrary, the supernatural appears as a rupture of universal coherence. The wonder here turns into a prohibited aggression, threatening, which breaks the stability of a world in which the laws till then were considered to be rigorous and immutable. It is the impossible suddenly erupting into a world where the impossible is exiled by definition.²

Many of the short stories of the Argentine writer, Julio Cortázar, have been described as belonging to the literary genre of the fantastic, perhaps in the sense that Caillois has described it. In most of his stories, Cortázar interrupts everyday reality with doses of what might be called separate realities, or the unknown protruding into the known.

Much like another well-known Argentine writer of the fantastic—Jorge Luis Borges—, Cortázar himself adopted the designation of literature of the fantastic—"for lack of a better name," according to him—to categorize his short stories. According to the critic Jaime Alazraki, both Borges and Cortázar "were using the term [fantastic] in a wide sense in order to set it against literary realism and to distinguish thus two modes of perception and two styles of configuration."³ Alazraki goes on to state that "[t]he distinctive trait of the genre, in which everyone appears

1. Roger Caillois, *Images, Images...* Paris: José Corti; 1966. Spanish translation: Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 1970.

2. Caillois, 5.

3. Jaime Alazraki, *En busca del unicornio: the stories of Julio Cortázar (In Search of the unicorn: The Stories of Julio Cortázar)*. Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1983, IX.

to coincide, must consist in its capacity to generate fear or horror."⁴ Or, at least in Cortázar's case, the fantastic generates uncertainty or enigma. Alazraki is merely summarizing here the consensus of critics of the fantastic and does not necessarily agree with them that the fantastic should necessarily inspire fear or horror. Another critic who thinks that fear or horror is not necessarily an ingredient or a result of the fantastic is Tzvetan Todorov, who wrote a book on the subject; in it, he analyzes and summarizes previous studies of the genre and offers his own view:

In a world which is very much ours, the one we know, without devils, sylphs, nor vampires, an event occurs which cannot be explained by the laws of this familiar world. The one who perceives the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: or it deals with an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination, and the laws of the universe remain as they are (*the strange*); or the event has really taken place, is an integral part of reality, but now this reality is dictated by laws with which we are not familiar (*the marvelous*). Or the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being, or he really does exist, like other living beings. The fantastic occupies the length of time of this uncertainty; as soon as we choose one answer or the other, we get out of the fantastic in order to enter into a neighboring genre, the strange or the marvelous. The fantastic is the vacillation experienced by a being who knows nothing but the natural laws and who is suddenly confronted with an event of supernatural appearance.⁵

As we shall see further on, the characters in Cortázar's stories, all apparently "rational" or commonsensical beings, are suddenly or gradually confronted with events that are out of the ordinary, that make both they and the reader pause to consider these extraordinary events and perhaps ask the question: what is really happening here? What is reality?

Nevertheless, despite the two rather lucid and profound analyses of the literature of the fantastic by Caillois and Todorov quoted above, Alazraki asserts that writers such as Kafka, Borges and Cortázar do not fall easily under the rubric of the fantastic, as is traditionally understood. The critic asks the question: "What are we to do with some of the narrations by Kafka, Borges or Cortázar, of indisputable fantastic ancestry, which dispense with genies, horror and technology [a reference to Caillois's three stages in the development of the genre: the fairy story, the fantastic proper and science fiction]?"⁶ Alazraki proposes the name of "neofantastic" to some of the contemporary fantastic literature which does not, in his view, quite fit the mold of the traditional fantastic. He states: "If for the literature of the fantastic horror and fear constituted the route of access to *the other*, and the story was organized around that route, the neofantastic story dispenses with fear

4. Alazraki, 18.

5. Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*. Paris: Seuil, 1970, 40.

6. Alazraki, 25.

because *the other* emerges from a new postulation of reality, from a new perception of the world, which modifies the organization of the story, its functioning, and whose purposes differ considerably from those followed by the fantastic."⁷

Cortázar himself made a distinction between his brand of the fantastic and historical or traditional fantastic. While acknowledging his dues to master writers of the fantastic of the past, he placed his stories within a different category which, while owing to the past, opened a new perception and a different set of poetics:

The traces of writers like Poe are undeniably in the most profound levels of my stories, and I believe that without "Ligeia," without "The Fall of the House of Usher," I would not have had that inclination toward the fantastic which assaults me in the most unexpected moments and which spurs me to write as a unique way of crossing certain limits, of putting me in the territory of *the other*. But something indicated to me since the beginning that the road toward that otherness was not, as far as the form, in the literary devices on which the traditional fantastic literature depends for its celebrated "pathos," which was not found in the verbal staging which consists of disorienting the reader from the beginning, conditioning him with a morbid climate in order to oblige him to accede easily to mystery and fear . . . The irruption of *the other* occurs in my case in a manner markedly trivial and prosaic, without premonitory warnings, plots *ad hoc* and appropriate atmospheres like in gothic literature or in the present fantastic stories of bad quality . . . We arrive thus at a point in which it is possible to acknowledge my idea of the fantastic within a wider and more open register than the predominant one in the age of gothic novels and of the stories whose attributes were ghosts, werewolves and vampires.⁸

For the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, 20th century writers of the fantastic, such as Kafka or Blanchot (and, one might add, Borges or Cortázar), "have stopped depending on extraordinary beings; for them there is no more than one fantastic subject: man."⁹ Man is thus placed at the center of a perplexing universe, one that has not totally been explained away by science. While 20th century science and technology have largely discounted or ridiculed the supernatural beings and events recounted in traditional literature of the fantastic, they have largely not dealt with the philosophical idea of man's enigmatic presence within a puzzling reality, perhaps the central premise of "neofantastic" literature. In other words, science and technology have raised more questions than answers about man and reality. Some contemporary fiction writers, such as Kafka, Borges and Cortázar, have tried—each in his own unique style—to reflect and ask these lingering questions of man's place in the universe, of the mind's problematic relation to reality, whatever the latter may be. One of their common threads seems to be that reality is

7. Alazraki, 28.

8. Julio Cortázar, "Algunos aspectos del cuento" ("Some Aspects of the Short Story"), *Casa de las Américas*, 15-16 (1962), 3.

9. Jean Paul Sartre, *Situations I*. Paris: Gallimard, 1947, 12.

interpreted by the mind in infinite ways, that it is perceived in unique and sometimes strange ways by the mind which, paradoxically, also conceives it. Thus, the lull that rational thinking places on the mind is sometimes broken by the mind's brief and sudden excursions into the irrational, into the unknown or unknowable. In a sense, then, the mind creates reality or realities; but since it is so often numbed or deceived by its routine empirical observations and manipulations of the world (science and technology), it is often shocked or puzzled when it confronts different, startling realities ("the other"). According to Alazraki, in order to bring these other realities to light and life, the contemporary writer has had to create a new language and a different style of writing ("a new set of poetics"): "If the world, as Nietzsche writes, 'is an invention, a meager sum of observations, the neo-fantastic is an attempt to reinvent it starting from a new language, starting from a transgression of the names of things: it is infinitely more important to know the names of things than to know what they are ... It is sufficient to coin new names, new appraisements and new probabilities in order to create also 'new things' in the long run."¹⁰

As Cortázar suggests in his bizarre stories, the idea that ordinary reality is solid or always the same, is false. At times certain things occur that destroy the concept of the continuity of sameness. At times we are faced with events that baffle us, that "yank" us out of our complacent routine. Cortázar says in effect that these extraordinary interruptions of the ordinary, the subject matter of the neofantastic—to adopt Alazraki's terminology—are like, in the author's words, "openings to estrangement or exile, instances of an ungluing, the result of which is an unnerving of the usual because nothing is customary as soon as it is subjected to a silent and sustained scrutiny."¹¹ Again, then, the implication is that the mind—in a sense—takes stock of itself and reality and "decides" that routine reality is not always what it seems to be, that there is something more that is infinitely more complex and "strange" than what the "usual" tells us there is. Time for Cortázar and other writers of the "unusual" is not a straight-line *continuum*, but a record of multi-layered, multi-perspective changes which nevertheless occur simultaneously, or parallel with ordinary reality. It is also circular and cyclical, repeating itself from time to time. As Malva Filer puts it, "Cortázar, in a manner analogous to Robbe-Grillet, looks for the way in which the literary work will develop in a temporal complex in which present, past and future will come to be realized in the unity of consciousness."¹² Time then for a writer like Cortázar is, in his own words, "a diachrony which is sufficient by itself to disadjust all submission to city [or clock] time. Time that is more inward or deeper: encounters in the past, appointments of the future with the

10. Alazraki, 44.

11. Julio Cortázar, *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos (Around the Day in Eighty Worlds)*. México: Siglo XXI, 1967, 25.

12. Malva E. Filer, *Los mundos de Julio Cortázar (The Worlds of Julio Cortázar)*. Nueva York: Las Américas Publishing Co., 1970, 19-20.

present, verbal probes which simultaneously penetrate the before and now and annul them."¹³

As the title of one of his books—*La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* (*Around the Day in Eighty Worlds*)—implies, a day in the life of a "Cronopio," an imaginative and creative individual, is like an incursion into numerous different realities or worlds. Cortázar typically inverts an idea, in this case the title of a famous book by Jules Verne, to get his point across that the inward or mental journey of a man is infinitely richer and more complex, and thus more fraught with perils and joys of different sorts, than mere external or physical journeys, though these can also be made more exciting by introspection or imagination, or can serve to stimulate the creative powers of the mind. As Cortázar himself has said, "[n]o one can know how many worlds there are in the day of a *cronopio* or a poet."¹⁴ His worlds are thus "surrealistic," though he takes care not to identify himself too closely with surrealism as a literary movement. According to Filer, "... when Cortázar speaks of the presence of surrealism [in his works], he is not referring to the existence of a school, ideology or organized group. What interests him is the diffused presence of surrealism, its vitality as an active element incorporated to the vanguard movement."¹⁵ The author's surrealistic vision is, according to him, "a lived experience that is the most open possible to the world, and the result of that opening, of that porosity in front of circumstance, translates itself as the annihilation of the more or less conventional barriers that reasoning reason tries to establish between what it considers real (or natural) and what it qualifies as fantastic (or supernatural), including in the first all that tends to repetition, accepts causality and submits itself to the categories of the understanding, and considering as fantastic or supernatural all that which manifests itself with the character of exception, marginal, unusual."¹⁶

Another way of looking at Cortázar's stories is that of unreality living alongside reality. At any moment, at any place, reality—according to the author—can and is at times interrupted by the irruption of unreality, that is, by beings and events that are not ordinarily found in everyday reality. In her aptly-named article, "The Unreality in the Narrative of Cortázar," Rosa Boldori observes that if it is true that some of Cortázar's stories like "Los venenos" ("The Poisons"), "Reunión" ("Reunion") and "Final del juego" ("End of the Game") can be classified as realistic, none of the stories of this author can, on the other hand, be considered totally fantastic.¹⁷ The unusual or fantastic elements erupt within the confines of reality, they are of and in this world, but usually out of sight, hidden in the backs of our minds, in the

13. Cortázar, *La vuelta al día...*, 67.

14. Cortázar, *Ibid.*, 210.

15. Filer, 22.

16. Julio Cortázar, "Sobre el surrealismo" ("On Surrealism"), *Realidad*, 15 (1949), 349-50.

17. Rosa Boldori, "La irrealidad en la narrativa de Cortázar" ("Unreality in the Narrative of Cortázar"), *Boletín de Literaturas Hispánicas*, 6 (1966), 15-16.

individual and collective psyche or unconscious. The unreal, then, is like a beast within which surfaces at will, though it usually decides to remain hidden. It is often a reminder of our mortality and shakes up the complacent view that we have of the world and our place in it.

Malva Filer, in her book *Los mundos de Cortázar* (*The Worlds of Cortázar*), divides the author's stories into two categories. She writes: "To one of them would correspond those stories in which the author describes a situation, scene or circumstance such as can probably be produced in day-to-day reality, within its temporal and spatial limits, even though the interpretation of the same [the situation, scene or circumstance] might be subtle, in general."¹⁸ In this first group, Filer includes such stories as "Las puertas del cielo" ("The Doors of Heaven"), "Los venenos" ("The Poisons"), "Las ménades" ("The Maenads"), "La banda" ("The Band"), "Los amigos" ("The Friends"), "El móvil" ("The Mobile"), "Torito" ("Little Bull"), "Después del almuerzo" ("After Lunch"), "Final del juego" ("End of the Game"), "Los buenos servicios" ("The Good Services"), "El perseguidor" ("The Persecutor"), "La salud de los enfermos" ("The Health of the Sick"), "Reunión" ("Reunion") and "La señorita Cora" ("Miss Cora").¹⁹ The second category would include, according to Filer, those stories in which "an irrational, perturbing element is introduced," or in which "the planes of reality and fantasy, or reality and dreams, crisscross and mix."²⁰ In this second category might belong such stories as "La noche boca arriba" ("The Night Lying Face Up"), "Casa tomada" ("House Taken Over"), "La puerta condenada" ("The Condemned Door"), "La isla al mediodía" ("The Island at Noon"), "Las babas del diablo" ("The Droolings of the Devil"), "Axolotl," "Las armas secretas" ("The Secret Weapons"), "Continuidad de los parques" ("Continuity of the Parks") and others like these. Needless to say, it is in the second group that the fantastic or unreal elements are the most obvious, although, as has been mentioned before, they are also expressed—perhaps in more subtle, sinister ways—in the first group.

There are various themes of importance in Cortázar's stories. For example, there is the theme of the double popularized by Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*—in "Lejana" (*Far Away*). This story deals with a skinny woman of Buenos Aires who at certain moments has a kind of vision that she is not only in Buenos Aires but also in another country far away, in which everything is very different; she is also a poor woman, a beggar. Little by little, she sketches the idea of who that other dreamed-up woman could be and, finally, she goes out to look for her. She finds her on a bridge and they embrace each other. It is there that the change in the interior of the double is produced and the beggar woman goes away in

18. Filer, 26.

19. Filer, 26-27.

20. Filer, 27.

the wonderful body covered with furs, while the skinny one is left on the bridge as a raggedy beggar. The theme of the double is also evident in "Los pasos en las huellas" ("The Footsteps in the Tracks") and in "Una flor amarilla" ("A Yellow Flower"), in which the protagonist encounters a child who is he himself in an earlier stage. It is also evident, in a way, in "La noche boca arriba" ("The Night Lying Face Up"), in which the protagonist is both the dreamer and the dreamed, the motorcyclist dying in a hospital and the prisoners of the Aztecs about to be sacrificed. At the end, Cortázar inverts the story and makes the dreamed into the dreamer, adding a new twist to the theme.

In an interview he did with Ernesto González Bermejo, Cortázar speaks of his own personal experience with the idea of the double:

Once I split into two. It was the biggest horror that I've had in my life, and luckily it only lasted a few seconds. A doctor had given me an experimental drug for migraines . . . derived from lysergic acid, one of the strongest hallucinogens. I took the pills, felt strange, but I thought: 'I have to get used to it'.

One sunny day like today—the fantastic occurs in very common and normal conditions—I was walking on the *rue de Rennes* and at one given moment I discovered, without daring to look, that I myself was walking at my side; something of my eyes must have seen something because I, with a sensation of frightening horror, felt my physical doubling. At the same time I was reasoning very lucidly: I went into a bar, asked for a very strong cup of coffee and drank it all at once. I remained waiting and suddenly I understood that I could look again, that I was no longer at my side.²¹

There is no doubt that in this case, Cortázar's doubling effect was brought about, at least partially, by a drug, but the characters in a few of his stories "split" into two under normal conditions, that is, unaided by synthetic chemicals or drugs. The mind splits into two under certain personal or universal stimuli, whether they be escapist—such as in "Lejana"—or regressive—as in "Una flor amarilla"—, or dream-like, as in "La noche boca arriba".

Another recurrent and unusual theme that some critics have discerned in Cortázar's stories is that of incest, such as in the story "Bestiario", for example. But the one story which the author mentions specifically in his interview with González Bermejo as containing explicitly the theme of incest is "Casa Tomada" ("House Taken Over"). He says: "It deals with a brother and a sister but at some point it says 'that simple, matrimony of siblings', an image which has a lot to do with the relationship they live out . . . The two have enclosed themselves in the house and live lives of bachelors. It is not by any means a consummated incest but there exists an ambiguous relationship between the two siblings; that is evident."²² While the

21. Ernesto González Bermejo, *Conversaciones con Cortázar*. Barcelona: EDHASA, 1978, 35.

22. González Bermejo, 36-37.

incest theme has little to do *per se* with the fantastic proper, it is an unusual subject to deal with, especially in "neofantastic" fiction, and especially since society considers it a taboo subject. Cortázar has usually dealt with it in his stories in a subtle way, that is, in its platonic overtones rather than as physical consummation.

Returning to the biggest theme of all in the author's stories, that of the fantastic proper (or neo-fantastic, if one prefers), once again we find that a definitive definition of it is difficult to come by. Cortázar himself refuses to define it because he thinks that all that can be done is "to try to look for the notion of the fantastic..."²³ He goes on to state: "[The fantastic] is something very simple, that can occur in the midst of quotidian reality, in this sunny mid-day . . . The fantastic can come about without there being a spectacular modification of things. . . For me the fantastic is simply the sudden indication that, at the edge of Aristotelian laws and of our reasoning mind, there exist mechanisms perfectly valid, in force, that our logical cerebrum does not grasp but which at certain moments irrupt and make themselves felt. A fantastic act occurs once and it is not repeated; there will be another one, but the same one is not produced again."²⁴ The author attributes his heightened awareness of the fantastic to a child-like hypersensibility to the world.²⁵ In other words, the fantastic calls out to what is child-like in us; only as a child, or with the eyes of a child, can we truly perceive the wonders of the world. As adults, we often lose this marvellous way of seeing reality and become bogged down in boring or repetitive routines. But, as Cortázar's stories would seem to imply, at certain given moments we recapture—in essence—our childhood and see the world in a new light again, magically and fantastically. At times these revelations frighten us because we are not used to them, but they are mainly reminders of the magical heritage of which we are part.

This child-like way of looking at the world is at the very heart of the author's fiction. He sees literature basically as play or game, a serious one at times: "If we made a scale of values of games, that went from the most innocent to the most refined intentional ones, I believe that we would have to put literature (music, art in general) among those of the highest, most desperate (without attaching a negative value to this word) expressions."²⁶ Aptly enough, Cortázar's stories are populated with children, and in many, he assumes the point of view of a child. He explains his child-like propensities thus:

...[W]hen I started to write, toward the end of adolescence, in first youth, all of those layers [of child-like sensibilities] that had apparently been left behind came back in the form of characterers, of half-confessions, as is the case in the story "Los venenos" ["The Poisons"] and as is the case in "Bestiario" ["Bestiary"].

23. González Bermejo, 41.

24. González Bermejo, 42.

25. González Bermejo, 46-47.

26. González Bermejo, 49.

The depth of sensibility of the child Isabel of "Bestiario" is mine, and the child of "Los venenos" is I. In general the children that circulate through my stories represent me in some way.²⁷

Some of the other stories in which children play predominant roles are "Final del juego" ("End of the Game"), "Después del almuerzo" ("After Lunch"), "La puerta condenada" ("The Condemned Door"), and some others. Many critics have concluded that the literary treatment of children by Cortázar in his stories and novels is efficacious, that he feels them very close, and that he makes them speak and live without artificiality.

Another important element in Cortázar's stories are animals. Some of his stories are like zoos, populated with all kinds of animals, some exotic, some not. His first collection of short stories, and the leading story in this collection, are named—appropriately enough—*Bestiario* (*Bestiary*). Another story is named "Axolotl," the scientific denomination of an exotic Mexican fish. In this story, the protagonist identifies himself so strongly with the odd fish that he "becomes" one at the end. In turn, the animal that the author personally identified with the most is the cat: "I consider the cat to be my totemic animal and cats know it because I have confirmed this many times when I go to the house of friends who have dogs and cats: the dogs are indifferent to me, but the cats look for me right away."²⁸ Often also in his stories, human beings are seen as animals or are considered from the angle of an animal; there are certain areas in which they are seen zoologically. Why this fascination with animals? Cortázar's answer has an element of the fantastic or the unusual: "...[A]n animal moves (or lives) outside of time—given that history is given in a temporal context—, it repeats to the infinite the same movements, and for what? Why?: those are human notions that have no value for an insect. We say that the animal works, but the notion of work is invented by us."²⁹

One of the major fantastic themes in Cortázar's stories is time. As has been mentioned before, time is a problematic element in the author's stories and is often annulled or broken (in its linear continuity) by experiences which seem to be either out of time or which seem to occur simultaneously or circularly. For example, in the story "El perseguidor" ("The Persecutor"), the protagonist Johnny is keenly aware of the fracture of linear time when he says at one point, "... I'm touching this tomorrow," or when he tells that in the subway between stations he suddenly realizes that he has been thinking in a few moments a series of things that if he were to unravel in ordinary time would take him much longer. Here then is the idea that psychological time is really timeless when compared to clock time because it is not

27. González Bermejo, 50.

28. González Bermejo, 52.

29. González Bermejo, 54-55.

measurable and has no notion of linear, measured time. Psychological time is really then a timeless break in the continuity of clock time.

Another story where psychological time plays a major role is "Liliana llorando" ("Lillian Crying"), the first story of the collection *Octaedro*. In this story, there is an irruption of a time different from that of clock time. A dying man thinks about the future life of his wife Lillian, spanning several months, which in clock time occurs in two or three days writing in the clinic. The irony is that he does not die but the future he foresaw for his wife, which included another man, is fulfilled in another plane of time, but fulfilled nevertheless. In "La autopista del sur" ("The South Freeway"), a group of people caught up in a huge traffic jam enters a dimension out of the ordinary where time passes quickly: there are seasonal changes, loves, deaths, pregnancies, etc., which all suddenly come to an end when the traffic jam is broken and the people return to their ordinary lives.

The idea of psychological time in Cortázar's stories is closely connected to intuition or a sixth sense, and the ones most attuned to this are, according to the author, the common people: ". . . the more I deal with the common people, people that are not very educated, the more I'm amazed at their capacity for intuition and at the openness that they have for certain things which the erudite and the hyperintellectuals do not always have."³⁰ This is in tune with the idea that logic or reasoning (the tool of the intellectuals) is usually opposed to intuition and therefore subject to linear time, whereas intuition works outside of ordinary time.

How does Cortázar get his "fantastic" effects across? What are the techniques, the style of writing that insinuate or reproduce those unusual elements of reality? One more or less obvious way is through language, that is, the words and syntax he employs in his stories. The author manipulates these in such a way that they create an atmosphere that is familiar yet strange, an effect which Nicolas Bratosevich has described as *extrañamiento*, or astonishment.³¹ The critic, in a prologue to his anthology of Cortázar's stories, sees the element of astonishment as being effected through language and hyperbole:

. . . [T]he problematization is double, that of acts and words, because the language of technification, when applied to a reality so predictable as climbing a stairway surprises itself as a language, parodying itself, and thus denounces the excesses of an age that runs the risk of losing its freshness when it loses its freedom of movement, boxing it all in. The other modality of astonishment is the *narrative hyperbole*, by which is forced into the improbable a situation which is in itself an ordinary one, such as for example a traffic jam in the highways of access to a big city. In "La autopista del sur," that incident is stretched to the period of a year, which leads the characters isolated in their cars to disalienate

30. González Bermejo, 63.

31. Nicolás Bratosevich, ed., *Julio Cortázar: Antología*. Buenos Aires: EDHASA, 1978, 21.

themselves from their individualism . . . : by virtue of the pressure of the circumstances, all or almost all discover a distinct form of society, marked by communitarian concerns, and they realize it.³²

Cortázar's language could be described as "skeletal," devoid of flowery or superfluous words. He owes this somewhat laconic technique to Jorge Luis Borges, another Argentine writer of the fantastic. Cortázar has often acknowledged this technical debt to Borges. On one occasion, he said: "My readings of the stories and essays of Borges, in the period in which he published *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* [*The Garden of Forking Paths*] showed me a language of which I had no idea. . . The first thing that surprised me reading the stories of Borges was an impression of 'dryness'. I asked myself: 'what is going on here? This is admirably told, but it would seem that more than an addition of things it's rather about a continuous subtraction.'" ³³ Thus, according to Omar Prego, there are three main elements in the author's stories: 1) an economy (Borges-like) of words; 2) the structural notion of the story which, according to the author, coincides also with his structural notion of language; 3) music,³⁴ about which the author says: "For me, writing is a musical operation. We have already said this many times: it is the notion of rhythm, of euphony, not euphony in the sense of pretty words, of course not, but rather the euphony which comes out of syntactic drawing (we are not talking of language) which, having eliminated everything unnecessary, everything superfluous, demonstrates pure melody."³⁵

Another stylistic or literary technique which Cortázar uses in his stories is that of understatement, which is closely tied with his economy of words. For example, in "Casa tomada," the protagonists, a brother and a sister, are slowly invaded in their house by something unknown, but they accept this invasion and their total displacement nonchalantly, not even bothering to investigate or speculate about the strange event; they merely accept it as fate, there's no alarm or fear. The same is true of "Carta a una señorita de París" ("Letter to a Lady of Paris"), in which the vomiter of little rabbits nonchalantly describes the unusual experience which drives him to suicide; again, the tone is one of understatement, without alarm or fear, unquestioning. One could say that the characters who undergo these strange, unusual experiences are under a state of shock, in this case literary shock, and thus seem to accept these events without questions, alarm or fear; the understated tone of the narrators of these stories would seem to support this theory. Or it could also be that Cortázar does not want to give the whole story away by too many explanations, but rather wants to leave it up to the reader to draw his own conclusion. A third

32. Bratosevich, 22-23.

33. Omar Prego, *La fascinación de las palabras: Conversaciones con Julio Cortázar*. Barcelona: Muchnik Editores, 1985, 59-60.

34. Prego, 24.

35. Prego, 61.

possibility is that these strange, sinister events are just not explainable, they are part of the unknown, of the mystery and enigma of existence. The open-ended technique used by the author, in which the narrator is no longer omniscient but limited in what he knows or sees, is also evident in such enigmatic stories as "Continuidad de los parques," where the man who reads a novel is at the same time the protagonist of that same novel—without his (or the narrator's, perhaps) knowledge; at the end of the story, he may perhaps suffer the consequences of this identification. In this, as in many other stories by the author, the ending is insinuated but never clearly articulated.

Cortázar may perhaps employ the device of literary shock to make the reader aware of the absurd dichotomy of reality in Western philosophy. Because reality does not only consist of repetitive everyday routine or the logic that supports this, but also of the myriads of mental experiences we have while going through these routines. Which is real? I believe that Cortázar would say that both are real, or that everything is real, or that the question is absurd because no one has a cornerstone on reality. Reality, for Cortázar, is an unknown complexity and it is absurd to believe only in the empirical, rational observations and explanations of science. We must consider everything experience everything, because the totality of it all is reality. Cortázar perceives the dichotomy between reality and fantasy, waking and dreaming, science and literature, to be meaningless. For example, in the story "La isla al mediodía" ("The Island at Noon"), the steward in the airplane flying over the island every day at noon finally fulfills his desire to retire on the island but, in apparent contradiction, the corpse that appears floating on the sea after the plane crashes, is his. Puzzling? Yes. Here the story splits into two parallel levels: that of the steward bored literally to death of his professional routine, and that of the steward who has realized his dream of living on an island paradise—they are both played out by the steward Marini and neither one can be diminished as being fictitious; they are both valid in Cortázar's literary world.

Similarly in "Sobremesa" ("After-dinner Chat"), one of a group of friends shares with the others an experience which, however, the rest will not have shared with him, nor will they ever, because one of them dies before the reunion can be realized. Again, the parallelism between the "fictitious" and the "real", dreams and life, brings up the enigma of reality itself and momentarily suspends our logical certainties as well as our system of values, because as the saying goes, "up and down don't mean a great deal when one no longer knows where one is." One of the apparent motives of this and other similar stories seems to be to turn our world upside down—or to turn the tables on us—, in order for us to reexamine and question our complacent views of reality and make us glimpse other ways of perceiving. In "Todos los fuegos el fuego" ("All the Fires the Fire"), the oddity of the title ushers in another bizarre experience: two characters, apart in time by centuries, share—without knowing it—an event which draws them and their experiences into one: the burning catastrophe. Comments the critic Bratosevich: "The title of the story

universalizes both situations till he converts all deaths into one unanimous death; and along the same line, all lives.³⁶

While "Todos los fuegos el fuego" merely suggests the idea of reincarnation, "Las armas secretas" ("The Secret Weapons") is somewhat more explicit. In this story, the protagonist feels himself more and more invaded by a dead man whom he ignores and who is avenging in him the loss of the woman who had a love relationship with both, in different situations and different times. However, it is in the story "Una flor amarilla", ("A Yellow Flower") where the idea of reincarnation reaches full "bloom," so to speak: its protagonist discovers that he is part of a link of a series of infinite reincarnations, which condemn him thus to a kind of cyclical immortality: "The worst thing is that Luc would die in turn and another man would repeat the figure of Luc and his own figure till he dies, so that another man would in turn enter into the wheel. . . ." ³⁷ But the most vertiginous example yet of this "karmic wheel" or cosmic kaleidoscope of life is given in "Las babas del diablo" ("The Droolings of the Devil"), perhaps Cortázar's most enigmatic story. In it, the photographer Michael ends up identifying himself with his own photographic camera in such a way that, in a first instance, he recognizes himself as a "double": both the man who is alive writing his own story and, at the same time, the lens of his camera, which is immobilized in an unrecoverable eternity, from which it is always focusing on the sky, registering the time of the clouds and the doves— a kind of death from which the lives of others are detected. But life and death, temporality and still eternity, are not all that disconcert Michael the narrator. Since what is in play is his own identity, he needs to include in his story the complication of how to write it because it is no longer clear who is definitely telling the story, the man or the camera or . . . : "One will never know how to tell this, if in the first or second person, or using the third plural, or continuously inventing forms that will serve no purpose."³⁸ Perceiving the uselessness of trying to determine the identity of the narrator (i.e., his own identity), Michael—the literary alterego of Cortázar—suggests that it is Time itself, the illusion of change and movement in a constant, eternal Cosmos, which is telling the story, his story and that of all others. Comments Bratosevich: "Evidently here the duplicity [of the narrator] seems to have been atomized till it becomes a multiplicity to the infinite, since Michael—the "I"—, the camera and the blond woman, and finally all of the grammatical persons, the singular and the plural, serve as the identification of the true narrator."³⁹

The cosmic implications of "Las babas del diablo" may perhaps serve as concluding reflections on Julio Cortázar's preoccupation with the so-called fantastic and on his overall motives, intentions or purposes in dealing with extraordinary

36. Bratosevich, 42.

37. Bratosevich, 43.

38. Bratosevich, 43-44.

39. Bratosevich, 44.

mental phenomena in his short stories. The author is truly wrestling with the ontological questions of Reality, Being and Time: What is reality? What does it mean to be alive or dead? What is time and how does it affect us as individuals (or is there such a thing as individuality in an impersonal cosmos)? These and similar questions are truly metaphysical explorations into the enigmas of existence, life and death. By inserting bizarre experiences into what are otherwise ordinary lives, Cortázar is asking his readers to ponder the big questions, to break their dull routines and try to glimpse into the unknown, into the Cosmos. Literature is thus for him an exploration into the Mind, the creator of all conceptions and perceptions about the Universe. What makes us sentient, thinking beings is this universal awareness of phenomena, be they "ordinary", be they bizarre. The problem that we all have is that we tend to dull our minds, our consciousness, only with the immediate acts of everyday survival—basic things such as eating, working, sleeping and reproducing— that we forget or neglect the metaphysical, cosmic heritage of which we are all part. Cortázar's mission seems to be to remind us that there is more out there than meets the eye, and he does this in his stories by inserting such "fantastic" elements as dreams, imagination, creativity, nightmares, fears and, ultimately, the splitting of the "I" into double or multiple beings living in multi-layered times and spaces who are finally absorbed into the Cosmic Energy of Time. Thus, Cortázar is ultimately trying to distance himself (and his readers) from traditional Western philosophy, which tends to rely too much on logical reason, and embrace Eastern or Oriental philosophy, which sees men or individuals as "waves" of the Cosmic Ocean or as infinite spokes of the infinite Wheel of Life.

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